

4 Buses Set Afire in Suburbs of Paris

By Katrin Bennhold International Herald Tribune

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PARIS On the eve of the first anniversary of three weeks of rioting that wracked the Paris suburbs, the police were worrying about an outbreak of copycat violence after youth gangs set four passenger buses on fire in five days.

No one was hurt in the attacks, but some passengers barely escaped the flames, police and transport officials said Thursday.

The tactic was the same each time: A group of young men, some masked or hooded, waited at a suburban bus stop, then forced the passengers off and set the vehicle ablaze.

In one incident Thursday, police said the attackers apparently were armed with handguns, an ominous progression from the metal bars and rocks typically used last year. And at least one attack took place outside one of the housing projects that have been the focus of the violence.

The Paris transit system has suspended some of its night service in trouble spots and is considering other measures, like rerouting buses to avoid dangerous areas.

"This is different from last year. I haven't seen anything like this before," said Joaquin Masanet, head of the police union. "It's one thing when it's a baseball bat. Here we have men in face masks waving guns."

Defense Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie said what set the latest string of attacks apart was an apparent "desire to kill."

"Some individuals are looking to provoke, and sometimes go further," Alliot-Marie told the broadcaster i-Tele.

The first bus was burned in daylight Sunday in Grigny, east of Paris. The three others were burned in quick succession Wednesday night and early Thursday.

Just before 1 a.m. on Thursday morning, about 10 young men, five of them armed with handguns, ambushed a bus in the suburb of Montreuil, east of Paris, the police said. They herded the driver and his passengers off at gunpoint before driving off. In a nearby housing project, they set the bus ablaze.

Earlier that night, half a dozen youths attacked a bus in Nanterre, west of the capital, in an area usually considered safe by Paris transport officials. The youths, their faces hidden by hoods and masks, doused the bus with flammable liquid and set it on fire. The five passengers and their driver barely had time to get out in time, according to a transit systems spokeswoman.

In a third incident, south of Paris, three young men forced passengers off a bus before catapulting a makeshift gasoline bomb into the empty bus.

Franck Louvrier, spokesman for Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, said it was too early to compare this week's events with last year's violence.

"You can't compare four weeks of riots to what happened on that one night," he said.

But he stressed that the Interior Ministry was on high alert.

"We are very vigilant," he said. "It is very serious that in one case they appear to have used guns. In France, a firearm is much harder to obtain than, say, a baseball bat."

On Thursday night, police had not confirmed whether the guns used in the attack were real. If they were, Louvrier said, it would suggest that organized gangs were behind the attack.

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